



## **RACE TO THE BOARD:** **Strategies for Readiness, Recruitment, and Retention** **of Black Trustees on Green Nonprofit Boards**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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*“If we don’t have a diverse board that actually reflects the diversity of this country, we simply cannot achieve our mission as an organization. We have to have that diversity, both to bring different perspectives and to make sure that we are engaging this country at the broadest level in support of the objectives that we have...and to make sure that our work is in fact relevant to communities of color and across the nation.” —BOARD LEADER*

*“If you’re really doing the work, it’s going to be uncomfortable. You should feel uncomfortable. And the moment that a white male board member feels comfortable, they should be concerned. Because where we are in this country right now is an uncomfortable moment and will remain so for a very long time. So if you’re doing the good work, it’ll be uncomfortable. Get ready.” —BLACK LEADER*

### **THE CALL FOR RACIAL DIVERSITY ON GREEN BOARDS**

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For over a decade, much has been written about the critical importance of board and staff diversity in achieving impact, including in the environmental and conservation field. The COVID-19 pandemic, anti-Black police brutality, unprecedented political dissent, and environmental calamity have further exposed the racial disparity that exists in the United States. The need for greater board diversity has become more urgent than ever before.

The past year brought mounting pressure and responsibility for those in leadership to respond equitably and to ensure that Black voices are heard. The evidence presented in this report unequivocally suggests a need for reform. Green nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) working in the environmental and conservation sector – or “green groups” – are in a prime position to achieve progress in environmental justice.

While many believe that such reform is morally right, the evidence shows that the increase of diversity within organizations has tangible benefits. Diverse groups tend to

be more innovative when compared to homogeneous groups.<sup>1</sup> Diversity within boards has been correlated with an increased degree of effectiveness in executive leadership, an increased recruitment pattern regarding diversified membership, and an increased level of community trust, transparency, and support.<sup>2</sup> And board diversity leads not only to manifold thinking but also to improved board performance and relationships with investors.<sup>3</sup>

The impact of racial diversity on corporate and nonprofit companies is clear: diverse outlooks, experiences, skill sets, and voices have been shown to improve and strengthen board performance in a multitude of domains, including profit, productivity, relationships, and innovation.

Despite the urgent need for Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC<sup>4</sup>) communities to be fully represented in the environmental and conservation field, sizable gaps exist in the funding white-led environmental groups receive versus what is awarded to BIPOC-led groups. Specifically, a recent report from the Inclusion, Diversity, and Equity in Environmental Philanthropy (InDEEP) initiative found that a \$2.7 billion dollar funding gap exists.<sup>5</sup>

Research shows that a lack of trust in organizations led by people of color is the underlying cause of this funding imbalance. This lack of trust can also be directly translated to the lack of placements of Black candidates on boards. To solve the issue of inequitable funding, it is necessary to go to the root of the problem – board composition. The question arises: *How can nonprofit boards be assisted in being ready for, recruiting, and retaining Black trustees?*

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## INDEEP AND RACE TO THE BOARD

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The Institute for Strategic and Equitable Development (ISED), in collaboration with its implementation partner, Keecha Harris and Associates, Inc (KHA), facilitates a philanthropy-focused professional development series: Inclusion, Diversity, and Equity in Environmental Philanthropy (InDEEP). InDEEP engages a network of foundation staff, including senior leaders, committed to integrating racial equity and social justice throughout environmental

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<sup>1</sup> Katherine W. Phillips, “How Diversity Makes Us Smarter,” *Scientific American*, October 1, 2014, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/author/katherine-w-phillips/>.

<sup>2</sup> Patricia Bradshaw and Christopher Fredette, “Determinants of the Range of Ethnocultural Diversity on Nonprofit Boards: A Study of Large Canadian Nonprofit Organizations,” *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 42, no. 6 (2013): 1111–1133.

<sup>3</sup> PricewaterhouseCoopers, *The Collegiality Conundrum: Finding Balance in the Boardroom: PwC’s 2019 Annual Corporate Directors Survey*, 2019, <http://www.circulodirectores.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/pwc-2019-annual-corporate-directors-survey-full-report-v2.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) is not a term that resonates with everyone – this is an evolving lexicon. InDEEP started this work using the term “people of color.” Some Indigenous people felt that this term did not reflect their experience. In this dynamic environment, InDEEP wants to convey that its initiatives speak to all people who are marginalized due to their degrees of non-proximity to whiteness. InDEEP’s intention is that the term “BIPOC” includes Asian and Latino/a/x people as well as other racially and ethnically under- and misrepresented groups.

<sup>5</sup> InDEEP Initiative, *Closing the Gap: Insights from the Field to Close the \$2.7 Billion Funding Gap Between White-Led and BIPOC-Led Environmental and Conservation Organizations*, September 2021, <https://www.indeepinitiative.org/reports>.

and conservation philanthropy. Since 2017, the InDEEP initiative has reached over 1,200 leaders and staff at 180 foundations, representing total assets of approximately \$172 billion.

Building on the momentum and sociopolitical opportunities to reverse environmental racism and advance climate justice, a new body of work emerged from InDEEP in 2020. Race to the Board (R2B) is a two-pronged approach intended to disrupt current practices that are not bringing sufficient levels of Black leadership to the boards of environmental and conservation organizations. R2B aims to identify ways to cultivate more equitable and inclusive NGO board practices while amplifying BIPOC voices and participation in leadership roles within the environmental and conservation field.

## KEY FINDINGS

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InDEEP conducted interviews with 35 board leaders representing 16 prominent green organizations and 39 Black leaders in the field; a total of 74 participants were interviewed. (For more detail, see “The Research,” below.) The interviews yielded rich responses.

- **Lack of diversity:** Board leaders reported that diversity is very important in environmental and conservation organizations. However, those in top positions were predominately white, and nearly one-third of the green organizations reported having no Black board members.
- **Lack of readiness:** Some boards have been operating with a racial equity lens for years, while others are only beginning their racial equity journey. Likewise, the level of understanding regarding structural racism in environmental justice is uneven, with few board leaders demonstrating a tangible recognition of the connection between structural racism and the work the organization is doing. The majority of groups have not prioritized organizational discussions on deep institutional disparities. Black leaders spoke to a board’s lack of readiness as being a barrier to the inclusion and active participation of Black board members and noted readiness as an area that needs to be improved.
- **Recruitment strategies:** Board leaders said they wanted to build a pipeline to Black communities and broaden their organization’s network of recruitment. They reported the following recruitment methods:
  - hiring a diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) recruiter or executive search firm;
  - creating junior boards and paid fellowships and internships; and
  - rethinking term limits, governance structure, and requirements to join a board.Black leaders said they wanted to know they are being recruited for the value and skill they bring to a board (rather than being treated as “tokens”). They also noted

that critical mass matters – there is a greater likelihood of recruiting Black leaders if a board is already diverse.

- **Recruitment challenges:** Board leaders identified the following challenges in recruiting Black board members:

- board ignorance regarding qualified candidates;
- pipeline issues, board structures, and homogeneously white networks; and
- lack of past emphasis on equity or inclusive systems.

Black leaders mentioned systemic issues, monocultural boards, and lack of cultural readiness as challenges to recruitment.

- **Retention strategies:** Both groups of interviewees said that green group boards should do the following to enhance retention:

- increase transparency in hiring processes and leadership promotion opportunities;
- provide clear expectations of board requirements prior to recruitment;
- implement policies and/or practices aimed at improving board culture;
- provide onboarding practices and mentorship programs;
- increase equity and inclusion in practices and policies; and
- engage Black leaders and relationship building inside and outside the boardroom setting.

- **Retention challenges:** While some board leaders did not see great challenges with retaining Black board members once they had been recruited, others described racism and microaggressions that may result in harm from inauthentic inclusion. Black leaders discussed multiple occurrences that can lead to resigning from a board, including:

- a dismissal of the fact that racism exists;
- a lack of focus on the internal work needed to foster equity and diversity on a board and in an organization; and
- the practice of “tokenizing” Black board members.

- **Increased engagement:** Most board leaders said that increased engagement and reach will only occur by ensuring representation from all populations and by broadening their organization’s mission to include environmental and social justice. They noted that more evidence-based training is needed to ensure that all board members grasp this reality. Both board leaders and Black leaders observed that green organizations often focus on aspects of the outdoor environment without recognizing

the intersectionality of social justice, environmental justice, and the actual people living in the environments they seek to protect.

- **Indicators of inclusive culture:** The majority of the green NGOs interviewed collect demographic data on their boards, but there is not a uniform method of collection, and the purpose of collecting these data is not clear. Both board leaders and Black leaders said that demographic data collection is only one way to track inclusion and diversity.
- **Social justice-oriented indicators:** When discussing social justice-oriented indicators and metrics that could help green groups effectively measure annual progress, board leaders referred to their organization's DEI plan and noted that both qualitative and quantitative metrics should be used to track progress. Black leaders pointed to the importance of benchmarking an organization's impact in Black communities while also highlighting the need for disaggregated data.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FIELD

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While there is work already being done to enhance DEI within green NGO boards, these boards are now poised to step deeper into leadership, address problematic behaviors, and embrace innovation.

The implications for practice are seen at the individual and interpersonal level, the organizational level, and the sectoral level. To effectively build and sustain inclusive board culture, boards need to:

- Be intentional, authentic, explicit, and transparent in developing and communicating DEI goals.
- Prioritize the individual and interpersonal reflection and growth necessary for organizational transformation.
- Dismantle, recalibrate, and rebuild systems historically rooted in white supremacy.
- Expand networks, create connections, and rethink strategies of recruitment to broaden leadership reach.
- Build the pipeline for Black leaders by working with historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), creating junior boards, funding fellowships and internships, and starting organizational chapters at colleges and universities.
- Be inclusive with practices and policies by engaging, valuing, and acknowledging the skill sets and contributions of Black board members and by providing effective onboarding methods and mentorship programs.
- Remember that critical mass matters. By including more than one Black member, the board may not only benefit by having increased talent and representation, but the board may also find that those members are more likely to stay.

- Go beyond demographic data collection, and establish both quantitative and qualitative metrics to measure DEI.
- Recognize the intersectionality of environmental and conservation work and social and racial justice. Without uplifting and working in power with the people most often harmed by environmental catastrophe, organizations will be less likely to have an impact.

## THE RESEARCH

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During the planning and design phase of the R2B project, a comprehensive literature review was conducted to survey existing information surrounding DEI efforts within nonprofit boardrooms. Researchers then posed a set of seven learning questions regarding readiness, recruitment, retention, and metrics and environmental impact through DEI:

1. What are markers of a board's commitment to genuine strategies designed to cultivate cohesive group DEI planning, development, and implementation?
2. What supports do Big Green<sup>6</sup> groups need to further diversify their boards and increase the number of Black board members?
3. What are effective practices and what are the challenges for recruiting Black board members for the Big Green nonprofits?
4. What are effective practices and what are the challenges for retaining Black board members at the Big Green nonprofits?
5. What do Big Green boards need to help increase field engagement and amplify their message?
6. What indicators are environmental and conservation organizations using to measure progress around building inclusive culture?
7. What are the social justice-oriented indicators rooted in racial equity and justice that Big Green groups should use to measure one to five years of progress?

Using these learning questions as a guide, KHA led the collection, analysis, and reporting of data from 35 interviews with board leaders representing 16 prominent green organizations and 39 Black leaders in the field; a total of 74 participants were interviewed. The research team garnered the experiences and expertise from two primary participant groups: 1) board chairs and CEOs of prominent green NGOs (board leaders), ancillary professionals, and green NGO leadership support staff and 2) Black practitioners, board members,

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<sup>6</sup> According to the Center for Media and Democracy's SourceWatch, Big Green is a term used "...to describe the biggest environmental organizations in the United States. These are heavily-staffed, well-funded non-profit corporations each with budgets in the tens of millions of dollars a year, offices in Washington, DC and other major cities, highly paid executive directors, and a staff of lobbyists, analysts and marketers. Big Green environmental groups together raise and spend hundreds of millions of dollars a year, most of it contributed by non-profit foundations and individual donors." See The Center for Media and Democracy, "Big Green," SourceWatch, last updated February 25, 2020, [https://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Big\\_Green](https://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Big_Green).

scholars, and funders in the environmental and conservation sector (Black leaders). It is important to note that the vast majority of Black leaders who were interviewed (36 out of 39) serve in some role on a board; thus, they brought a dual perspective to the conversations.

## **MOVING FORWARD: ENVIRONMENTAL SOLUTIONS FOR ALL COMMUNITIES**

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Race to the Board intends to move the environmental and conservation field forward to tangible, sustainable change that benefits all communities. The goal of this research is to add to and support work concurrently being done by others in the field to create more equitable and inclusive organizations while including the voices of those most often impacted by environmental racism.

If green groups are to create broad-based solutions for everyone, their boards must include those most impacted by environmental catastrophe, especially Black communities. A more racially equitable and inclusive movement can emerge when organizations with a history of white supremacy and homogeneity change the actions and practices of their boards. Sharpening the collective focus on effective strategies for readiness, recruitment, and retention of Black board members can propel the field toward the deep change needed to address the climate crisis and other environmental challenges in the 21st century.



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## Appendix C

# Board Leadership Interview Protocol

1. How long have you worked in your current role at \_\_\_\_?
  - a. In the context of the environmental and conservation field, what else should I know about your professional background?
2. How important is board diversity for “green” organizations on a scale of 1 to 5 (with 1 being Not at all important and 5 being Very important)? Please explain your rating.
3. How important is board diversity for your organization specifically on a scale of 1 to 5 (with 1 being Not at all important and 5 being Very important)? Why?
4. How diverse would you say your board is with regard to race, ethnicity, and gender? How many Black men or women are on your board?
  - a. How do you track board demographics?
5. Why do you think that there are not more Black board members on your board (e.g., lack of connection, lack of interest, limited promotional sources, etc.)?
6. Please describe any internally *inclusive* policies and practices that are implemented by or within your board culture.
7. What do you think would help further increase your board diversity, specifically Black board members?

Prompt or follow-up questions:

  - a. What would be helpful with recruitment efforts? How to build the pipeline?
  - b. What would be helpful with retention efforts?
  - c. What else would be helpful in further increasing your board diversity?
8. Would having more Black board members lead to better outcomes for your organization (e.g., more effective strategies, amplifying message, etc.)? Why or why not?
9. Please describe what data the board uses to measure your progress. Are there any measures that look at one to five years of progress? Are any of the data disaggregated by race?
10. Please describe your board’s understanding of how structural racism shows up in environmental justice.
11. What strategies have you found to be pivotal in operationalizing and supporting environmental justice?
12. Would you like to provide additional information for any of the questions I asked you today?

## Appendix D

# Black Leadership Interview Protocol

1. How long have you worked in your current role at \_\_\_\_?
  - a. What else should I know about your leadership experience? What should I know about your background in the context of the environmental and conservation field?
2. Do you think it is important to serve on boards at nonprofit organizations? Why or why not?
3. Have you served on a board? If so, please describe your experience (both positive and negative).
4. Why did you decide to join the board? Or why have you not joined a board?
5. Do you think it is important for boards to be diverse and include Black leaders? Why or why not? What about “green boards” – those at large environmental and conservation nonprofits, specifically?
6. Can you describe specific benefits to having a more racially and ethnically diverse board?
7. Are there challenges involved in having a more racially and ethnically diverse board? Please explain.
8. What do you think “green groups” can or should do to ensure more inclusive and more racially and ethnically diverse boards?
9. What would you as a Black leader want from a board to feel valued and included? Please discuss:
  - a. Any specific recruitment strategies
  - b. Any specific onboarding/preparatory strategies
  - c. Any specific retention efforts
  - d. Any specific board structures or inclusive policies
  - e. Anything else?
10. What could you personally bring to a “green board”?
  - a. Any specific expertise?
    - i. Fundraising capacity
    - ii. Legal background
    - iii. Governance experience
    - iv. Community relations

- v.** Climate justice background
  - vi.** Any other experience (e.g., other sector or industry)
- 11.** What type of data would you want to see to measure the board’s progress toward becoming a more inclusive and diverse entity (e.g., progress implementing procedures or strategic plan, progress toward quantitative goals, etc.)?
- a.** Can you think of any data or metrics that are especially relevant for environmental and conservation organizations?
  - b.** What data should be reviewed for one to five years of progress? Should any of the data be disaggregated by race and/or ethnicity?
- 12.** Would you like to provide additional information for any of the questions I asked you today?